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SUBJECT: ROMANIAN POLITICAL PARTIES SEARCH FOR AN IDENTITY
AS THEY PREPARE FOR EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT MEMBERSHIP

REF: BUCHAREST 0716

11. (SBU) Summary. Two of the six parties in the Romanian parliament have explicitly redefined themselves as "popular" or "conservative" this year and President Basescu's Democratic Party (PD) is considering a similar move. Their motive is to curry favor with the European Popular Party (EPP), a heavyweight in the European Parliament (EP). Starting in September, Romanian political parties represented in parliament will send a total of 35 observers to the EP. How the parties define themselves will determine their affiliations within the EP, where, after Romania's likely EU accession in 2007, Romania will send full-fledged MEPs. End Summary.

Rightward Trend for President's Party

12. (SBU) Senior leaders of President Basescu's Democratic Party (PD) have confirmed to Embassy officers that the PD is on the verge of formally redefining itself from a "social democratic" to a mainstream conservative party. Former Minister of Defense Sorin Frunzaverde characterizes the expected move as an attempt to allow the PD to affiliate itself in the European Parliament with the center-right European Popular Party (EPP). Frunzaverde, who publicly acknowledges that during the PD June 25 national convention that he will throw his hat into the ring for party president, describes the PD as essentially a center-right party, with an urban, middle class constituency. Other senior PD officials have told us that a formal break with left-of-center social democratic ideology would allow the PD to distinguish itself more clearly from its arch-rival -- the former ruling Social Democratic Party (PSD), from whose predecessor the PD split in spring 1992.

13. (SBU) PD leaders took the first public steps to break the party's formal ties with the center-left when they decided May 7 to allow candidates for the party's leadership positions to run on platforms that do not espouse social democratic values. Although the Constitution required President Basescu to resign his party membership when he assumed the presidency (based on the premise that the nation's president should abandon partisan politicking), the combative Basescu will probably dictate the PD's future ideological course - and its key leadership positions.

14. (SBU) One clear indicator of the party's probable future direction: Basescu, party leaders and ordinary rank and file members are still smarting at the Party of European Socialists (PES) May 19 decision to "postpone" the PD's membership bid - and to grant the PSD full membership. The PES acerbically concluded that the PD still needs to define its ideological stance. PES representatives also visited Bucharest May 10-11 in an (entirely unsuccessful) attempt to reconcile the viscerally opposed PD and PSD. Acting PD president and Basescu confidante Emil Boc drove a stake through the heart of Romanian social democratic unity, however, when he declared May 11 that the PD "cannot shake hands with the PSD, a corrupt, anti-reformist and communist party." Additionally, relations between PD and the international socialist movement have been chilly ever since the Socialist International openly backed PSD in the December 2004 parliamentary and presidential elections. Although many PD leaders and members would be relieved to finally sever their international social democratic ties, old habits die hard and some PD loyalists may still be wed to a vaguely left-of-center philosophy. Indeed, during a recent visit to Parliament, PolOfs observed PD deputies and staffers wearing lapel pins featuring the party's initials atop the socialists' trademark rose.

Opportunist "Humanists" Turn "Conservative"

15. (SBU) Over the same period, the PD's tiny governing coalition partner, the Romanian Humanist Party (initially a self-avowed "social-liberal" party and the smallest of the six parties represented in parliament) decided May 7 to change its name to the Conservative Party (PC) and to take steps to affiliate the newly named CP with the EPP. Media magnate, party president, and chief source of party funds Dan Voiculescu proposed the move to the party's congress,

which dutifully followed his "suggestion." Voiculescu, unsurprisingly reelected as party president by the congress, declared that "only a right-wing identity" can boost the party's sagging poll standings. He asserted that "striking similarities" exist between the humanist and the conservative doctrines - citing respect for private property, a hesitant attitude toward government meddling in the economy, and respect for family values, the Church, the armed forces and the nation. Many analysts view Voiculescu's move to redefine his party as the death throes of a dying - or at least very ill - political party: recent polls give the PC (vice PUR) less than a two percent standing in the polls. In any event, all independent political analysts and most ordinary Romanians recognize the PC as exactly what it is - a creation of tycoon Voiculescu lacking a meaningful ideological orientation, despite its attempts to paint itself as a reformist movement.

EPP's other Romanian Buddies

16. (SBU) The ethnic Hungarian party (UDMR), the fifth largest of the six parliamentary parties and a member of the center-right coalition, has been affiliated with the EPP since October 1999. The tiny Christian Democrat National Peasants' Party (PNTCD), with a modest support base in western Romania, is also an EPP member. The PNTCD decided March 5 to change its name to the Christian Democrat Popular Party (PPCD), in an attempt to curry favor with the EPP following its consecutive failures (in 2000 and 2004) to gain enough votes to enter parliament. Traditionally, the PNTCD has been the party in Romania most closely identified with the EPP; the PPCD's fragile electoral existence coupled with the move of more mainstream parties to the right calls into question the continuity of this relationship.

17. (SBU) Many political analysts deride as sheer opportunism the recent attempts of extreme nationalist Corneliu Vadim Tudor to reshape his Greater Romania Party (PRM) as a mainstream conservative party, redubbed March 12 as The Greater Romania Popular Party (PPRM). (Ref) The "new" PPRM, which has on paper shed Tudor as its leader, also approached EPP for support - but EPP rejected the request. PNL and PD deputies told PolOfs May 24 that PPRM appears to be a party on a steady downhill spiral, as its most hardcore backers, including ex-members of the notorious communist-era "Securitate" secret police die off and its "new" message attracts few, if any, voters. Nonetheless, the PPRM remains a force on the political scene, virtually tied for third place in Parliament with PD and having shown itself willing to enter into de facto alliances of convenience with the PSD in parliament against the PNL-PD-led center-right coalition.

The Big Question: Where to Sit at the European Club?

18. (SBU) Comment. Ideology counts for little on the Romanian political scene. As one senior PD politician recently told us, Romanian parties are "pragmatic." A more jaundiced observer would describe them as "wholly opportunistic." In any event, a road-to-Damascus conversion to free market principles and limited government a la Margaret Thatcher does not underlie the migration by several parties toward the right of center mainstream. Rather, the driving force is Romania's road to Brussels following its April 25 signature on the EU Accession Treaty, which entitles Romania to send 35 "observer" MPs to the European Parliament in September of this year. These observers will become full-fledged Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) upon Romania's almost certain EU accession on January 1, 2007. This means that each party in the Romanian parliament needs to decide, literally and figuratively, where it will sit in the European Parliament.

19. (SBU) Hans-Gert Poettering, an EPP German leader, announced May 21 that EPP will hold a special meeting of its leadership in Bucharest on June 2-3 to review the applications of Romanian parties. Assuming the PD moves definitively to the right, that party looks like the EPP's best bet, given that the PNTCD is nationally insignificant, the UDMR and PC are relatively minor parties and the PPRM remains an extremist masquerading as a moderate. Of the mainstream conservative wannabes, only Basescu's PD brings real muscle to the EPP. End Comment.

110. (U) Amembassy Bucharest's reporting telegrams are available on the Bucharest SIPRNET Website:
www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/bucharest.

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